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## THE SOURCES OF THE *ODYSSEY*

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Those who hold that the *Odyssey* is a traditional poem may roughly be divided into two classes: first, those who believe that the poem slowly developed under the guiding hand of succeeding generations, each generation refining, enlarging, or expurgating the poetry inherited from remote antiquity. This class is made up of Professor Gilbert Murray and his disciples, notably, J. A. K. Thompson who has recently set forth their views in a book, *Studies in the Odyssey*.<sup>1</sup> The second class consists of those who believe that there was a wide range of traditions connected with Troy, that a great mass of these became associated with Odysseus and his return, and that the poet of the *Odyssey* gave the poetic expression to these traditions; also that while the poet had high poetic gifts he confined himself mainly to songs and themes already known, and that the audience was already familiar with the essential outlines of the poet's songs, or, as Finsler expresses it, "The epic is the expression of the heroic saga, and that saga is not the result of poetic fancy."<sup>2</sup> Most Homeric scholars would indorse this second view, namely, the epic is the poetic expression of existing traditions.

In the opinion of the Murray school the *Odyssey* is a traditional and an expurgated poem, but these ideas are mutually exclusive. A poem cannot at the same time be both traditional and expurgated. Thompson's views as given in his book are as follows: p. 11, "Homer has no trace of the jealousy of the gods<sup>3</sup> which is something like a dogma for the rest of Greek literature, yet Herodotus and the Attic tragedians are no less conscious than Homer of the limitations of humanity, and they believe in the divine jealousy." From this he

<sup>1</sup> Reviewed by me in *Classical Philology* for January, 1915. Some of the sentences then used are here repeated.

<sup>2</sup> Finsler, *Homer*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> A mistake, as I have shown in *Classical Journal*, X, 271.

concludes that the belief in divine jealousy has been expurgated from Homer. That is, the *Odyssey* in this regard attains an elevation unapproached by the rest of the Greek world, and therefore these lower ideas have been expurgated. Again in arguing that the *Odyssey* is a traditional poem, p. 190: "It was the audience rather than the bard that chose the subject and the treatment, indeed the bard was more dependent upon his hearers than they were upon him, he had no other public, no appeal to a different tribunal or to posterity. Therefore the poet's matter was given him." The poet thus simply voiced the beliefs of his audience, but his audience which gave him his theme and his matter believed in the envy of the gods; then why did he expurgate it from tradition, a tradition with which that audience was already familiar and in which that audience believed? A sovereign genius might so overtop the mass as to doubt an accepted belief and ignore it in his poetry, but a mere purveyor of tradition could only echo the belief of his hearers; but they believed in the envy of the gods, hence the *Odyssey* cannot be at the same time an expurgated and a traditional poem.

Dr. Leaf in his *Homer and History*, p. 310, gives a most satisfying explanation for the absence from Homer of many of the most repulsive sides of Greek life:

It is free from many of the lower and coarser elements which are abundant in later Greek poetry, and which are in truth a direct inheritance from early stages of thought. But it is not the Epos itself which has been expurgated, but the society itself which gave rise to the Epos. The Achaian nobility had cast off much of the ancient dross when they entered Greece; in the courts of Mycenae they learned "good manners" and the ways of courts; they learned to avoid things which are not mentioned in the best society. Greek poetry arose in courts, in the atmosphere of a small and refined aristocracy; the lower elements were introduced at a later stage, and appealed to a mixed audience.

Murray and Thompson take it for an axiom that the heroes of Homer were originally gods, since in later times they were honored with shrines and offerings. We know that Alexander of Macedon was a man who later received divine honors, and we know that the Roman emperors were men who were later deified, and so with the saints and the apostles. The fact that there are shrines and temples named in honor of St. Paul does not prove that he was in origin a god. The fact that we have such convincing

evidence of divine honors paid to historical men warrants the assumption that a similar thing took place in an earlier age. How flat the promise of Calypso to make Odysseus immortal, if the hearers of the poem had already known him as a god! Then too Achilles was not prevented by his assumed divinity from dying ingloriously and being most miserable in Hades. How out of place in the mouth of a god were Achilles' bitter words, "Speak not to me of death, O illustrious Odysseus." Dr. Leaf has attacked vigorously the whole theory of the "faded god" in his first chapter of *Homer and History*.

The second view, namely, that the *Odyssey* is the poetic expression of existing traditions, is more reasonable, but it is not the truth. There are two traits inherent in tradition and traditional literature: a love for tracing lines of genealogies and the repetition of the same idea from various points of view. The Old Testament and Hesiod's *Theogony* are clearly intended to tell the traditions of the fathers and the inherited beliefs, and so accordingly there are the same repetitions, the same love for genealogies in both. There are in the Books of Samuel two accounts of the establishment of the Kingdom; two accounts of the origin of the proverb "Is Saul also among the prophets?"; two accounts of the flight of David into Philistia, and other similar repetitions. Hesiod twice tells of the birth of the Muses, once while tracing their origin on the side of the father, and once while tracing their origin on the side of their mother. The story of Pandora is told when he is telling of the duplicity of Prometheus and again when he is picturing the misfortunes of humanity.

This trait of repetition, so marked in such traditional works as the Old Testament and Hesiod, separates them at once from Homer, since not a single event described in the *Odyssey* is repeated, except under dramatic compulsion, and nothing narrated in the *Iliad* has any place in the later poem.

The second test of tradition is the preservation of genealogies, for genealogies are the particular mark of family or race pride. How all peoples love to call the roll of their ancestors!

The Old Testament abounds with them, and Hesiod's *Theogony* is largely made up of proper names. Prominent as Penelope is in

the story of the *Odyssey*, the name of her mother is not given and it is only by an accident that we learn the name of her father. Indeed the origin of Penelope is so indistinct in Homer that Aristotle in his *Poetics*, chap. xxv, is in doubt as to the name and home of her father. It is a mere accident which tells us the name of the mother of Odysseus and that he is not an only child. The *Odyssey* never suggests who is the mother of Helen, and it is only a chance remark which tells us that she is the daughter of Zeus, since the facts of her birth are passed over in silence. The practical ignoring of genealogies marks the *Odyssey* as something other than traditional poetry.

In this paper I hope to show that the *Odyssey* is not a traditional poem, but a new creation, and that while it assumes the events of the Trojan War as its background, the plot of the *Odyssey* never existed until conceived in the mind of Homer. The poem as a whole and in its detailed treatment is a new and original creation.

The poet of the *Odyssey* carefully avoids telling, not only all matters already known from the *Iliad*, but also all matters known from tradition as well. Other heroes came home from Troy, but where are the traditions on a large scale of the return of Diomedes, of Idomeneus, and even of Menelaus? What a chance for a poet to have taken the return of Menelaus and Helen for his theme! They traveled nearly as many years as Odysseus, they visited Cyprus, Sidon, the Erebus, Aethiopia, Libya, and Egypt, they too left at home a disordered kingdom, and, what was far better suited for a poet's purpose, they left at home a beautiful daughter. What was Helen's daughter doing all these years—Helen's daughter without a guardian or a chaperon? What took place in Sparta when both king and queen were gone? Why did tradition so crowd the halls of Penelope, the mother of a grown son, with ardent wooers and desert the young and beautiful Hermione?

The wanderings of Helen and Menelaus were not suited to the poet's plans as unfolded in the *Odyssey*, since a wife, however charming, would have proved an impossible companion in the fairyland to which the poet's fancy transported the hero.

How carefully he refuses to repeat the familiar traditions! Helen appears in the *Odyssey*, but we have no inkling of the fate

of her former paramours. What has become of Paris? What was her subsequent fate at Troy? We assume that Paris is dead and that Helen later transferred her affections to Deïphobus, of which there are but two slight indications: Menelaus (iv. 276) tells how Helen followed by Deïphobus came to see the wooden horse, and the bard (viii. 517) describes how after the destruction of the city Menelaus went straight for the dwelling of Deïphobus. These two faint references show that there must have been some tradition which related Helen and Deïphobus, and they show, in this case at least, that Homer avoided repeating a known tradition.

We are told (iv. 502): "Ajax son of Oileus might have escaped from the sea, even though he was hateful to Athena." The poet gives no inkling of the means by which Ajax had become hateful to Athena, but it must have been known from tradition, and hence was not repeated. Nestor and his family mourn the loss of Antilochus, yet there is no mention of the circumstances of his death; it is simply said that he was slain by an unnamed son of the Dawn. How did Ajax son of Telamon die? What was the end of Clytemnaestra? These and scores of important events are assumed as known from tradition, and so accordingly are passed in silence. What art the poet uses to avoid the necessity of repeating a familiar tale! When Telemachus came to see Nestor he at once blocked the telling of familiar tales by saying, "We know the fate of all the others." Proteus waves the necessity of telling things already known from the *Iliad* or tradition by simply saying to Menelaus, "You were present at the battle."

Odysseus evidently had but a small place in existing tradition, as is shown by the skill and care with which the poet arouses interest in him and prepares the hearer for the outcome. Little indeed in regard to Odysseus is assumed as familiar to the hearer. The gods in the halls of Zeus discuss his fate, while even yet in Ithaca the spear-rack stands full of his spears, the son sits and sees in his mind's eye his returning father, the wife weeps for him by night and by day, the aged servant saves the best of the wine for him, the omen of birds relates to him, the aged seer foretells his coming, Athena stays long from Olympus for his sake, the son travels far in search of tidings from him, and a goddess joins therein;

Nestor can talk of little else than Odysseus, and even in the palace of the returned Menelaus there is no joy, because of the absence of this valiant friend, while Helen narrates a tale of his cunning and exploits. Everything in Olympus, Ithaca, Pylus, Sparta somehow turns toward Odysseus. No hero ever had such an introduction as the hero of the *Odyssey*; indeed the details are so many, so varied, and so minute that we are forced to believe that he was but dimly known to the poet's audience.

It was necessary not only for the poet's audience to be interested in this hero, but a second interest must be aroused and a new audience must be created eager to hear from Odysseus' own lips the story of his wanderings. Nothing told in the first four books has been told to this second audience, so that the poet must start in afresh to arouse a new interest in a new group of hearers. Not a single method of arousing interest in the first audience is repeated in the second.

When Odysseus comes into the presence of the Phaeacians he at first hides his identity and later shows such wonderful athletic ability that they are interested in him for his own sake. Then the bard repeatedly sings of the glories of Odysseus and his exploits at Troy; hence the athlete's glory won by an unnamed stranger easily merges into that of the hero. It is only by withholding the name of Odysseus that the poet can show in his presence how great was his heroic renown in the land of the Phaeacians, and it was only by the glory he had won as a nameless victor that the Phaeacians could accept without questioning and at once this unknown stranger as the illustrious Odysseus. No audience not aroused to enthusiasm by what Odysseus is and has been would listen for hours to the long story of his wanderings. The real purpose of the games and the songs was to create this enthusiasm.

When Odysseus arises to speak we know that the story of Troy is well known to the Phaeacians, since twice the bard has sung of the exploits of Odysseus at Troy. Not much has he sung, but just enough to show how familiar they are with Trojan traditions. Odysseus is thus freed from the necessity of repeating a familiar story, so that he begins at once the tales of his wanderings with these words, "The wind bearing me from Ilium brought me to the

land of the Cicones," without a single reference to the deeds done at Troy. The songs of Demodocus thus served a double purpose: they showed that Odysseus would find an audience eager to listen, but, of far greater importance, they allowed him to take for granted a knowledge of the tale of Troy and made it possible for him to begin the story of his wanderings without a reference to what had happened there. The poet was thus saved from repeating for the sake of the Phaeacians a tradition already familiar to the poet's own hearers. This is the superlative piece of poetic economy, and has strangely thus far escaped notice. Just before Odysseus leaves for Ithaca Demodocus sings again, but there is no hint in regard to the theme of his song. All that Homer tells is this: "And among them sang the divine bard Demodocus, honored by the people." There is no need now to introduce anybody or to relieve the poet from the burden of repeating a familiar tale, hence the unremembered song. Phaemius did a like service in Ithaca, since in the first book his brief song of the fate of the Achaeans shows that here also the story of Troy needs no retelling, and so accordingly even Odysseus, when he returns, although he tells his wife of his wanderings and adventures, never mentions the fact that he has been at Troy or narrates a single exploit there. Phaemius also at his last appearance is not given the honor of a theme; the poet simply tells of his music. Each bard created by his songs the impression that Trojan traditions were already known and thus Homer was saved from the necessity of telling a familiar tale.

The bard is simply a shrewd bit of poetic economy intended to relieve the poet from the necessity of repeating an existing tradition.

The fabulous exploits told in the presence of Alcinous were based, for the most part, on existing folk-lore and fairy-tales, but the finished product as it left the hand of Homer is as little like the original material as a watch-spring is like the primitive ore. Grimm has collected a mass of tales suggesting Polyphemus, tales from many lands and many peoples; but there is little poetry in them and little human interest—nothing to approach the pathos of the blinded monster when he addressed the ram. Folk-lore gave the hint, but the poet conceived the idea of connecting it with



Odysseus and of making it a poetic creation. So closely has he joined the fate of Odysseus, the blinding of Polyphemus, and the wrath of Poseidon that we can hardly separate them. It is only in the story of the Cyclops that Odysseus loses his cunning, for he, despite the urging of his companions, awaited the return of the monster, but worse than that, he awaited him in a cave with but a single way of escape. Here the poet shows a trace of the hard material in which he worked: since the hero must be trapped in the cave, he cannot be trapped and retain his cunning, yet must be trapped if he is to show his cunning in his ability to escape. Here too in defiance of his companions he tells the monster his name, and thus makes possible the monster's curse, the curse so potent in bringing disaster to Odysseus. From Grimm we know the material in which the poet worked, but how it has been transformed under the genius of Homer!

The Sirens were known to other than Homeric traditions, but in the popular mind these creatures were the embodiment of lust and loathsomeness. It was the genius of the poet which took these revolting figures of popular tradition, endowed them with the bewitching enchantment of song, and made them offer not the temptation of satisfied lust but the nobler aspirations for the attainment of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The temptation the Sirens brought to Odysseus was the same that came to Eve in the garden of Eden. "For no one," said they, "has ever yet passed us by in his black ship, but having heard the sweet song from our lips, he goes on in greater joy and in greater knowledge, for we know all things, such as the Argives wrought by the will of the gods, and we know all things which occur on the fruitful earth." Although the Sirens were given the poet by tradition, yet his conception thereof rises to the dignity of a new creation. In their natural state these various myths are disconnected, in most cases there is no sequence, and the order of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* may be shifted at will; but in Homer they have a poetic sequence: the loss of eleven ships must precede the year spent with Circe, the sin against the god of the sun and his herds must precede the storm, and the loss of his companions

<sup>1</sup> This comment on the Sirens is largely borrowed from Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, pp. 197 f.

must precede his long stay with Calypso. Whatever all of these figures may have been in folk-lore, it was the genius of the poet who elevated them into coherent poetry and joined them with the story of Odysseus. Homer took these stories from Fairyland, gave them a human setting with human connections, and put them back in Fairyland; hence it comes that this part of the *Odyssey* has no setting in actual history or geography. Dr. Leaf shows conclusively in his *Homer and History* that from the time Odysseus passed Cythera until he touched Ithaca he was in a land of pure fancy, while the rest of the *Odyssey* belongs to a real epoch in real lands.

The *Odyssey* creates its own atmosphere and furnishes its own explanations; the known either from the *Iliad* or from tradition is assumed as known; it is only the new of which the details are given. Dr. Leaf in his *Troy*, p. 52, shows how the poet takes for granted the essential facts of the Troad except the springs, which he describes in minute detail: "The marked way in which this is done, so different from the allusive touches where other scenery is concerned, may be taken as the poet's warning that he is here drawing on his own imagination."

The poet, it seems to me, takes for granted the tales of tradition and describes only those plots or situations which are new, which he has himself created. Two of the leading themes of the *Odyssey* are the guilt of the suitors and their impending punishment. These are really one, since poetic justice demands that the innocent be spared and the guilty suffer. The feelings of the hearer would have been outraged if Odysseus had slain innocent men, or the guilty had gone unpunished; hence the poet must prepare the hearer to demand and expect the doom of the suitors. When Athena comes from Olympus she finds Telemachus "seated among the suitors, plagued at heart, anxious for the return of his father, that he himself might have power and honor." He then places a seat for his guest at a distance from the suitors, "lest he might be annoyed by the confusion, since the suitors are not civil." The suitors then come to their meal and enjoy the music and the dance with no evident marks of rudeness. Telemachus complains to his new-found friend that the suitors are consuming his unrequited substance, but as suitors they could do this without crime; Athena

tells him that, "if Odysseus came, the suitors would flee," not indeed as criminals, but as wooers of the wife, not the widow of the hero. As yet there is no notion of crime. Telemachus is advised to plan the means for expelling them, and there is a hint of what is in store when she reminds him of the glory won by Orestes in slaying Aegisthus. Later Telemachus accuses the suitors of wasting his property, to whom Antinous replies with warmth and Eurymachus with impudence, but the suitors are still only suitors, they are not criminals, either in deed or in purpose.

When Telemachus, in the second book, complains of the ruin the presence of the suitors is bringing, Zeus sends two fighting eagles, and with this as an omen Halitherses prophesies that Odysseus will return and take vengeance on the suitors; Eurymachus then threatens the seer with violence and cows the spirit of Telemachus; Mentor tries to calm their violence and threatens them with risking their own lives; Leocritus replies, "Even if Odysseus should come he would meet certain and immediate death at their hands." Athena comes in the guise of Mentor and assures Telemachus that the suitors are preparing their own doom, the doom which is near and by which they shall all perish in a single day. This chord which sounded so feebly at first is now loud and clear. When Telemachus tells his nurse that he is going to Pylos or Sparta, she begs him remain at home, since the suitors will plan to slay him and divide his possessions. Later when he is in Sparta and tells of the violence of the suitors, Menelaus compares their fate when Odysseus returns with that of a hind which had put her young in the lair of an absent lion. While Telemachus is on his journey Antinous proposes that the suitors man a ship and slay him as he returns. No one opposes this outrageous suggestion, but it is greeted with enthusiasm by all; hence all the suitors are murderers in plan and heart. They are willing to slay the son of their king, they deserve death. With these few strokes the poet has made the hearer feel that the suitors are not merely impolite youngsters who deserve reproof, but actual murderers who merit death.

At the end of book IV the character of the suitors is known, and their punishment is clearly foretold. It can hardly be that this

slow development of character and the delayed glimpse of its consequences is nothing but the telling of an old and familiar tale.

The evident effort to prepare the hearer for the fate of the suitors by showing that they are doomed and that they deserve their doom is strong proof that Odysseus and the suitors had no connection in existing tradition.

The hints furnished by tradition were vague and few. Odysseus was already known as a shrewd and daring warrior, the son of Laertes, the lord of a distant and rugged isle, and it was just this fact that he was from remote and barren Ithaca and was surprisingly clever that made him so well fitted to the poetic purposes of a poem dealing with fables and fancies.<sup>1</sup>

The poet took his hints from tradition, but he did not repeat the tradition, and his own motto was put into the mouth of his hero who said to the Phaeacians, "You already know this, and it is grievous unto me to repeat a thing which is already known." The poet like Odysseus repeated little or nothing to his hearers with which they were already familiar.

The character of Odysseus, his home in Ithaca, the name of his son and of his father, and the fact of his return were the gifts of tradition, but the plot of the *Odyssey* and its treatment are pure poetic and original fiction. It was this invention, this substitution and addition which so scandalized Hesiod whose honest shepherd's heart protests that "the Muses know how to utter falsehoods in a way that makes them seem to be true." "But the Muses," he adds, "know how to utter the truth also." It was Hesiod's privilege to tell the truth; he wrote the truth and no one can doubt that his genealogies are the traditional truth. Homer made a different claim for the bard, since he regarded him as inspired and self-taught, *αὐτο-δίδακτος*; but "self-taught" must mean something far different from a vehicle for conveying existing traditions. I can think of no two words which would so little apply to a poet who handed on the existing traditions as the two words "inspired" and "self-taught."

<sup>1</sup> I am delighted to read this sentence in Dr. Leaf's *Homer and History*, p. 280: "And it is hardly possible to suppose that Penelope had any substantial existence before the composition of the *Odyssey*."

The *Odyssey* has neither of the two distinguishing marks of traditional literature, genealogies and repetitions; it avoids telling the known; it assumes the existence of a great mass of traditions; it hints at these traditions but avoids repeating them. Whatever tradition there may be in the *Odyssey* is only an accidental glimpse at the setting. The action and the plot are new and original creations.

This paper was written before Dr. Leaf had published *Homer and History*, and the only important changes made have been the quotations from that work. It is gratifying to me to see how we have independently reached, in so many cases, the same conclusions.